

Neal of the Navy

(Continued from page 2.)

"To the sea—to the sea"—the voice of the multitude raised itself in agony. There was but one cry—"to the sea—let me past—make room for me—to the sea—to the sea."

At a crazy little wharf Ilington twitched himself and Manuella and the child dolly to one side and let the crowd plunge on.

He scanned the surface of the bay, the fringe of boats. The bay was dotted with small boats, laden to the gunwales. The water was alive with swimmers.

Ilington turned suddenly—at his side stood Hernandez. Ilington shook his head. "There's not a chance," he said. "Senor Ilington," said Hernandez, "you are indeed fortunate to have tied yourself to me. Always I have something up my sleeve." He jerked his head. "Follow me," he added.

Ilington, wondering, followed, dragging Manuella with him. Swiftly the group moved along the water front—they fought their way inch by inch. Suddenly Hernandez darted out upon another wharf.

"Stand in a circle," he commanded, "and when I say the word—quick action, senor."

Then Hernandez stooped quickly and jerked back a trap door that had been fitted into the plank.

"Quick," he whispered, "drop."

He seized Manuella and dropped her through the opening. She screamed—this scream rose to a shriek when she struck the water. But her alarm was unwarranted. There was no danger—she stood waist-deep in water. Ponto followed with a leap—he knew his ground. Ilington lowered himself warily, to save Annette from injury; clung for one instant to the edge of the opening with one brawny hand, and then dropped straight as a plummet. Hernandez followed suit, closing the trap door behind him. The closing of this door left them almost in total darkness.

"Senor," whispered Hernandez, "I have a boat. One moment, please."

He groped about and caught a rope tied to a pile. He drew it in, hand over hand.

"In," said Hernandez—"everybody in."

The group obeyed. The boat was small.

"Senor," said Hernandez, "you are large—you are tall. See yonder ray of light—it is an opening, just wide enough to admit of this small craft. Leap out, senor—draw us thither—it is the sole way to the sea."

Ilington dragged the boat through the narrow opening and swung back into his place.

"I'll row," he said.

Suddenly Hernandez pointed toward the north. "Look, senor," he exclaimed, "succor—yonder is salvation."

Ilington followed his glance. His face lighted.

"Salvation is right," he returned in tones of relief, "a steamer—and, what's more, she flies the American flag. Good luck."

Under the command of her captain, Hardin, the Princess had steamed back into the rain of living fire to rescue whom she might.

On the forward deck of the steamer stood Captain Hardin—and beside him his small son—to welcome refugees. And there were many refugees to welcome. Captain Hardin soon saw he must discriminate.

Finally he shook his head. "Ben," he told his mate, "we're filling up. Pick your crowd from now on—only the helpless—children, women, old men. Reject all others."

Welcher, with two of the crew behind him—both scarred into a frenzy—all armed with capstan bars—raised aloft his blue flag.

"No more—no more!" he cried. "I'll brain the first man who tries to get aboard."

Suddenly above the din, a powerful voice was heard.

"Aho, there, Princess," cried this voice.

Welcher followed the sound. It came from the lungs of a powerfully built man rowing a leaky boat.

"Make way there," bellowed the oarsman, Ilington; "one moment, Princess. Where's the captain?"

Ilington seized his little daughter Annette and uncovered her head.

"Never mind me," he said. "I want refuge for this woman and the child."

Welcher was adamant. "Not another ounce of human flesh aboard this boat," he said.

There was a tug upon his arm. He turned. Little Neal Hardin, the captain's son, stood at attention and touched his cap. He pointed with one hand toward little Annette Ilington.

"Please, Mr. Welcher," he pleaded, "let her come aboard. She don't weigh an ounce."

The mate turned savagely upon the boy. "You mind your own business, brat," he cried. The boy stared at him a moment, then saluted and started off.

"Yes, sir," he returned, "that's what I'm going to do."

He darted off on the run, and sought his father, Captain Hardin.

"There's just one ounce—a little bit of an ounce—wants to come aboard, captain—pop," he pleaded; "a twenty-two little ounce. Won't you let it come?"

He dragged the captain forward. The captain, laughing good-naturedly, followed him.

Meanwhile Ilington, with sure discrimination, placed the child in Manuella's arms once more, and forced the



Ponto's Eyes Reddened; His Face Flushed Suddenly. He Fingers the Hilt of His Knife and Glanced Toward Hernandez.

native woman out upon the ladder. "Courage, Manuella," he kept whispering; "courage, Annette. They've got to help you out."

Captain Hardin leaned over the side. "Let the woman and child come aboard," he shouted; "back there, men back. Welcher, let them come aboard."

"Ah-h-h," cried Ilington in a tone of relief. With a final almost superhuman effort he lifted Manuella to the rail of the Princess, safely aboard. He was about to pass the child to her, but young Neal Hardin was holding out his arms.

"I'm a good catch," said young Neal; "put it there."

Ilington glanced for one instant into the frank face of Neal Hardin and the captain of the ship. He drew a sigh of relief. He nodded swiftly.

"Whatever happens, thank God she is in good hands," he said.

Captain Hardin put his lips to his megaphone.

"Put her about there," he shouted out; "full steam ahead."

Even as he said it there was a fresh shower of huge red cinders; some ash—some in molten state. There was an added cry of agony from shore and sea. Even the refugees aboard the ship cowered under the hail of fire in terror. Suddenly at the captain's side Manuella, the native woman, uttered a gasp. A red-hot cinder of unusual size had smitten her upon the temple as she crouched low over little Annette Ilington. Clutching the captain by the arm she fell prone upon the deck. Young Neal Hardin sprang forward and caught the child before she fell.

Manuella's breath came fast—the thinnest portion of her skull had been pierced by the jagged edges of the cinder. Wild-eyed and frantic, but well realizing that she was upon the point of death, she caught young Neal by the blouse.

"I die—you take baby—some day papa come—very rich—"

She said no more. The captain bent over her, rose and glanced at Welcher significantly. Then he turned to his young son Neal.

"Take the little girl into our cabin, Neal," he said. "Give her to your mother."

Neal clutched the warm bundle in his arms and staggered with it aft.

As Mrs. Hardin unwound the shawl something dropped clinking to the cabin floor. Neal seized it and handed it to his mother.

"It's a bag of gold," he said.

No sooner had he said it than another object fluttered to the floor—an oilskin packet sealed with sealing wax. Mrs. Hardin placed the two upon a small stand set into the side wall of the cabin. She continued to unwind the shawl. Again they started. Pinned to the child's dress was a crumpled piece of paper, and upon the piece of paper was a hastily penciled scrawl. Mrs. Hardin read it. This is what it said:

"I am Annette Ilington, heiress of the lost Isle of Cinnabar. I will be very rich some day. Save my clothes and the oilskin packet until my father comes for me or until I am eighteen. I must look out for a man with a saber cut upon his face. For God's sake keep me safe."

CHAPTER IV.

After a Night of Fear.

The three men—Ilington and his two companions—sat dejected in their badly leaking boat and watched Captain Hardin's vessel fade away into the distance. Hernandez watched her keenly as she disappeared. Into the innermost recesses of his mind he tucked away the fact that she was the steamer Princess of New York. Some day that knowledge would be of use to him. Hot ashes brushed against Ilington's cheek; some rested on his shoulders. He shook himself like some huge mastiff. He seized the oars.

"Come," he said, "we've got to get out of this—and right away. This boat is filling fast."

"Go to it, senor," said Hernandez. "Row."

It was not a request; it was a command. It was a strange thing that as long as Ilington had borne the child in his arms, Ilington had been the leader of the three. Now his independence seemed to leave him.

For hours he rowed—he forgot he was a human being. His oars rose and fell with the regularity of machine-

like movement. Suddenly Hernandez spoke.

"Careful, senor," he commanded. "Behold the surf."

He was quite right. They were crossing some bar well off the shore. Before they knew it they were in the midst of a tumult of wind-driven angry waves. Ponto shrieked. A wave towered high above them and fell with thunderous thud upon the bottom of their boat. She went under.

"Come on," cried Ilington; "a hand on each of my shoulders—I'll take you safe ashore."

Half an hour later the three men staggered out of the battered surf and sank down exhausted upon a strip of beach.

Dawn broke with Ilington still sleeping heavily. Ponto was the first to wake. He shook Hernandez, placing his finger on his lips. Hernandez sprang up with the agility of a panther. He collected his faculties in an instant. He placed his hand upon the shoulder of the sleeping man and shook him.

"Wake, senor," he commanded; "it is day."

"Senor," went on Hernandez, "let us resume our conversation—our talk of yesterday. Where is this lost island?" He thrust his face into the face of Ilington. "And where," he demanded, "is the oil-skin packet?"

"Where, also," added Ponto, "is the bag of gold?"

Ilington smiled. "So you have searched me, have you?" he returned. "Well, you're welcome, gentlemen, to anything you find." He rose to his feet. "Come on," he commanded, "we're marooned. I'm hungry. Let us see what we can find."

Hernandez caught him by the arm. "Where is the packet?" he demanded. "And where the gold?" persisted Ponto.

Ilington smiled. "Both traveling north," he answered, "with Annette Ilington. They are confined to her care."

"And why?" asked Hernandez.

Ilington shrugged his shoulders. "I thought you and I and Ponto here were booked for death, that's why. Who knows—we may still be booked for death."

Hernandez glanced significantly at Ponto. "Some of us may," he said.

"Come on," said Ilington, "there are mussels on those rocks yonder. Follow me."

He strode into the water and waded toward a patch of rocky reef beyond. Ponto seized a bit of jagged wood that lay upon the beach. He and Hernandez waded after Ilington. Once on the rocks Ilington stooped and tore huge shell fish from their moorings with his naked hands. As he did so Ponto in a sudden frenzy lifted high the billet in his hand and brought it with a crashing blow down upon the head of Ilington.

Ilington fell like a log. Hernandez sprang at Ponto and shook him as a terrier shakes a rat.

"You fool," he cried, "what do you gain by this?"

"Wait," exclaimed Ponto, clawing Ilington with his clutching talons; "let us search him thoroughly."

The search yielded nothing to them. "Fool," repeated Hernandez, "you have done a useless thing. There's always time I tell you."

He reached the beach and darted zig-zag hither and thither, always babbling, always cackling.

There was reason for this. Somewhere in his skull there was a dent—a deep depression—made by the billet of wood that had struck him down. Ever and anon as he went he stroked the wound with the right hand and drew the hand away, covered with blood.

"Red—red—" he babbled and went on.

CHAPTER V.

A Night With Flame.

Young Neal Hardin was proud of his father's boat, the Princess. He never ceased admiring her. There was no part of her he didn't love. He was well assured that she must hold the same fascination for other people as she did for him. He concluded that little Annette Ilington would fall desperately in love with his huge boat and he escorted that young lady to all parts of the vessel—in fact, he walked her little legs off.

They explored the lifeboats, the forward quarters of the crew; they visited the pilot; they climbed the bridge. Finally, they visited the hold. It was well they did.

Something had happened—and had happened on the day before while the Princess lay off Martinique. Cinders had fallen by the hundreds—a condition of affairs that the captain and his crew had well prepared for. It was impossible to be everywhere at once and a cinder—a live, red messenger of death—had taken advantage of this condition of affairs, had wormed its way unnoticed into the cotton cargo, and like a red-hot cancer had eaten into it with flame.

With just the slightest trace of excitement Neal drew the little girl to the deck and with her at his side sought and found his father and whispered to him.

The captain stiffened as with shock; his face turned pale. He held up a hand and three members of the crew rushed to him. He gave hasty, whispered orders.

In ten minutes the fire hose was laid out—men were working at the pump. But in ten minutes something else had happened—the hold was filled with smoke. Huge tongues of flame were leaping heavenward, and in that same ten minutes panic took command—pandemonium reigned.

"Abandon ship," Hardin cried. "All hands to the boats! Women and children first."

Two days later, a boatload of half-starved refugees parched with thirst, chilled by the cold night and baked by the heat of day, were sighted by a cruiser of the navy. Half an hour afterwards its exhausted passengers clambered wearily but gratefully up the cruiser's side.

The last of the refugees to leave the lifeboat and last of all to save the lifeboat's crew to reach the cruiser's deck was young Neal Hardin. Clutched in his arms was the recumbent sleeping figure of little Annette Ilington.

Mrs. Hardin was offered the commander's cabin. She accepted with gratitude. She tucked Annette Ilington and Joey Welcher into their berths, but when she came to look for Neal, her young son, she found him missing. She searched for him. A seaman touched her on the arm.

"You'll find him there, ma'am," said the sailor.

He pointed toward a group in a corner of the sleeping deck. The crew

were swinging hammocks ready for the night. Mrs. Hardin listened. She heard the clear tones of her young son Neal. She hastened to the group and caught her offspring by the hand.

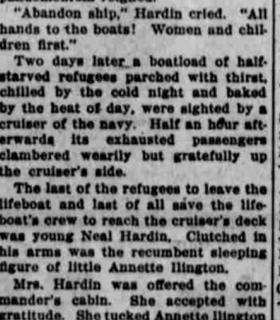
"Mom," he pleaded, "don't." He pointed toward a hammock high above his head. "That's where I'm going to sleep—just once—tonight."

A seaman touched his cap and grinned. "He's a sailor from the ground up, ma'am," he said. "You can't make him anything else if you was to try a hundred years."

All through that long night a woman lay, wide-eyed, with dumb agony within her heart. She didn't know—she couldn't know—that Capt. John Hardin was exploring the depths unknown with a knife sunk between his shoulder blades by his mate, Welcher. But she knew that she would never lay eyes upon him more—never feel the clasp of his hand, nor his kiss upon her lips, nor his strong arms about her—never in this world again.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Ponto in a Sudden Frenzy Lifted High the Billet in His Hands and Brought It Down.



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